

#### IV. THE EVENTS OF ONE DAY

##### 1. AUGUST THE FOURTH. TILL FOUR O'CLOCK

The early part of the next week brought an answer to Cytherea's last note of hope in the way of advertisement--not from a distance of hundreds of miles, London, Scotland, Ireland, the Continent--as Cytherea seemed to think it must, to be in keeping with the means adopted for obtaining it, but from a place in the neighbourhood of that in which she was living--a country mansion not twenty miles off. The reply ran thus:--

KNAPWATER HOUSE,

August 3, 1864.

'Miss Aldclyffe is in want of a young person as lady's-maid. The duties of the place are light. Miss Aldclyffe will be in Budmouth on Thursday, when (should G. still not have heard of a place) she would like to see her at the Belvedere Hotel, Esplanade, at four o'clock. No answer need be returned to this note.'

A little earlier than the time named, Cytherea, clothed in a modest bonnet, and a black silk jacket, turned down to the hotel. Expectation, the fresh air from the water, the bright, far-extending outlook, raised

the most delicate of pink colours to her cheeks, and restored to her tread a portion of that elasticity which her past troubles, and thoughts of Edward, had well-nigh taken away.

She entered the vestibule, and went to the window of the bar.

'Is Miss Aldclyffe here?' she said to a nicely-dressed barmaid in the foreground, who was talking to a landlady covered with chains, knobs, and clamps of gold, in the background.

'No, she isn't,' said the barmaid, not very civilly. Cytherea looked a shade too pretty for a plain dresser.

'Miss Aldclyffe is expected here,' the landlady said to a third person, out of sight, in the tone of one who had known for several days the fact newly discovered from Cytherea. 'Get ready her room--be quick.' From the alacrity with which the order was given and taken, it seemed to Cytherea that Miss Aldclyffe must be a woman of considerable importance.

'You are to have an interview with Miss Aldclyffe here?' the landlady inquired.

'Yes.'

'The young person had better wait,' continued the landlady. With a money-taker's intuition she had rightly divined that Cytherea would

bring no profit to the house.

Cytherea was shown into a nondescript chamber, on the shady side of the building, which appeared to be either bedroom or dayroom, as occasion necessitated, and was one of a suite at the end of the first-floor corridor. The prevailing colour of the walls, curtains, carpet, and coverings of furniture, was more or less blue, to which the cold light coming from the north easterly sky, and falling on a wide roof of new slates--the only object the small window commanded--imparted a more striking paleness. But underneath the door, communicating with the next room of the suite, gleamed an infinitesimally small, yet very powerful, fraction of contrast--a very thin line of ruddy light, showing that the sun beamed strongly into this room adjoining. The line of radiance was the only cheering thing visible in the place.

People give way to very infantine thoughts and actions when they wait; the battle-field of life is temporarily fenced off by a hard and fast line--the interview. Cytherea fixed her eyes idly upon the streak, and began picturing a wonderful paradise on the other side as the source of such a beam--reminding her of the well-known good deed in a naughty world.

Whilst she watched the particles of dust floating before the brilliant chink she heard a carriage and horses stop opposite the front of the house. Afterwards came the rustle of a lady's skirts down the corridor, and into the room communicating with the one Cytherea occupied.

The golden line vanished in parts like the phosphorescent streak caused by the striking of a match; there was the fall of a light footstep on the floor just behind it: then a pause. Then the foot tapped impatiently, and 'There's no one here!' was spoken imperiously by a lady's tongue.

'No, madam; in the next room. I am going to fetch her,' said the attendant.

'That will do--or you needn't go in; I will call her.'

Cytherea had risen, and she advanced to the middle door with the chink under it as the servant retired. She had just laid her hand on the knob, when it slipped round within her fingers, and the door was pulled open from the other side.

## 2. FOUR O'CLOCK

The direct blaze of the afternoon sun, partly refracted through the crimson curtains of the window, and heightened by reflections from the crimson-flock paper which covered the walls, and a carpet on the floor of the same tint, shone with a burning glow round the form of a lady standing close to Cytherea's front with the door in her hand. The stranger appeared to the maiden's eyes--fresh from the blue gloom, and assisted by an imagination fresh from nature--like a tall black figure

standing in the midst of fire. It was the figure of a finely-built woman, of spare though not angular proportions.

Cytherea involuntarily shaded her eyes with her hand, retreated a step or two, and then she could for the first time see Miss Aldclyffe's face in addition to her outline, lit up by the secondary and softer light that was reflected from the varnished panels of the door. She was not a very young woman, but could boast of much beauty of the majestic autumnal phase.

'O,' said the lady, 'come this way.' Cytherea followed her to the embrasure of the window.

Both the women showed off themselves to advantage as they walked forward in the orange light; and each showed too in her face that she had been struck with her companion's appearance. The warm tint added to Cytherea's face a voluptuousness which youth and a simple life had not yet allowed to express itself there ordinarily; whilst in the elder lady's face it reduced the customary expression, which might have been called sternness, if not harshness, to grandeur, and warmed her decaying complexion with much of the youthful richness it plainly had once possessed.

She appeared now no more than five-and-thirty, though she might easily have been ten or a dozen years older. She had clear steady eyes, a Roman nose in its purest form, and also the round prominent chin with which

the Caesars are represented in ancient marbles; a mouth expressing a capability for and tendency to strong emotion, habitually controlled by pride. There was a severity about the lower outlines of the face which gave a masculine cast to this portion of her countenance. Womanly weakness was nowhere visible save in one part--the curve of her forehead and brows--there it was clear and emphatic. She wore a lace shawl over a brown silk dress, and a net bonnet set with a few blue cornflowers.

'You inserted the advertisement for a situation as lady's-maid giving the address, G., Cross Street?'

'Yes, madam. Graye.'

'Yes. I have heard your name--Mrs. Morris, my housekeeper, mentioned you, and pointed out your advertisement.'

This was puzzling intelligence, but there was not time enough to consider it.

'Where did you live last?' continued Miss Aldclyffe.

'I have never been a servant before. I lived at home.'

'Never been out? I thought too at sight of you that you were too girlish-looking to have done much. But why did you advertise with such assurance? It misleads people.'

'I am very sorry: I put "inexperienced" at first, but my brother said it is absurd to trumpet your own weakness to the world, and would not let it remain.'

'But your mother knew what was right, I suppose?'

'I have no mother, madam.'

'Your father, then?'

'I have no father.'

'Well,' she said, more softly, 'your sisters, aunts, or cousins.'

'They didn't think anything about it.'

'You didn't ask them, I suppose.'

'No.'

'You should have done so, then. Why didn't you?'

'Because I haven't any of them, either.'

Miss Aldclyffe showed her surprise. 'You deserve forgiveness then at

any rate, child,' she said, in a sort of drily-kind tone. 'However, I am afraid you do not suit me, as I am looking for an elderly person. You see, I want an experienced maid who knows all the usual duties of the office.' She was going to add, 'Though I like your appearance,' but the words seemed offensive to apply to the ladylike girl before her, and she modified them to, 'though I like you much.'

'I am sorry I misled you, madam,' said Cytherea.

Miss Aldclyffe stood in a reverie, without replying.

'Good afternoon,' continued Cytherea.

'Good-bye, Miss Graye--I hope you will succeed.'

Cytherea turned away towards the door. The movement chanced to be one of her masterpieces. It was precise: it had as much beauty as was compatible with precision, and as little coquettishness as was compatible with beauty.

And she had in turning looked over her shoulder at the other lady with a faint accent of reproach in her face. Those who remember Greuze's 'Head of a Girl,' have an idea of Cytherea's look askance at the turning.

It is not for a man to tell fishers of men how to set out their fascinations so as to bring about the highest possible average of takes within the year: but the action that tugs the hardest of all at an



emotional beholder is this sweet method of turning which steals the bosom away and leaves the eyes behind.

Now Miss Aldclyffe herself was no tyro at wheeling. When Cytherea had closed the door upon her, she remained for some time in her motionless attitude, listening to the gradually dying sound of the maiden's retreating footsteps. She murmured to herself, 'It is almost worth while to be bored with instructing her in order to have a creature who could glide round my luxurious indolent body in that manner, and look at me in that way--I warrant how light her fingers are upon one's head and neck.... What a silly modest young thing she is, to go away so suddenly as that!' She rang the bell.

'Ask the young lady who has just left me to step back again,' she said to the attendant. 'Quick! or she will be gone.'

Cytherea was now in the vestibule, thinking that if she had told her history, Miss Aldclyffe might perhaps have taken her into the household; yet her history she particularly wished to conceal from a stranger.

When she was recalled she turned back without feeling much surprise. Something, she knew not what, told her she had not seen the last of Miss Aldclyffe.

'You have somebody to refer me to, of course,' the lady said, when Cytherea had re-entered the room.

'Yes: Mr. Thorn, a solicitor at Aldbrickham.'

'And are you a clever needlewoman?'

'I am considered to be.'

'Then I think that at any rate I will write to Mr. Thorn,' said Miss Aldclyffe, with a little smile. 'It is true, the whole proceeding is very irregular; but my present maid leaves next Monday, and neither of the five I have already seen seem to do for me.... Well, I will write to Mr. Thorn, and if his reply is satisfactory, you shall hear from me. It will be as well to set yourself in readiness to come on Monday.'

When Cytherea had again been watched out of the room, Miss Aldclyffe asked for writing materials, that she might at once communicate with Mr. Thorn. She indecisively played with the pen. 'Suppose Mr. Thorn's reply to be in any way disheartening--and even if so from his own imperfect acquaintance with the young creature more than from circumstantial knowledge--I shall feel obliged to give her up. Then I shall regret that I did not give her one trial in spite of other people's prejudices. All her account of herself is reliable enough--yes, I can see that by her face. I like that face of hers.'

Miss Aldclyffe put down the pen and left the hotel without writing to Mr. Thorn.